

Towns hope to renew decaying mill village bridging Presumpscot

● Windham and Gorham look to Lewiston as a models of what can be done for Little Falls.

By DAVID HENCH
Staff Writer

WINDHAM — When nearby North Windham was little more than a rural intersection, the village of Little Falls was a bustling center of employment, commerce and community life.

The village was home to a steel mill and a machine parts manufacturer that fed a vibrant community. But as the mills closed, displacing hundreds of jobs, the village neighborhoods and shops atrophied.

Now village residents and town officials want to rejuvenate Little Falls by attracting investment and new businesses to the old buildings. The town is seeking \$20,000 in federal grants as seed money to create a master plan for the area.

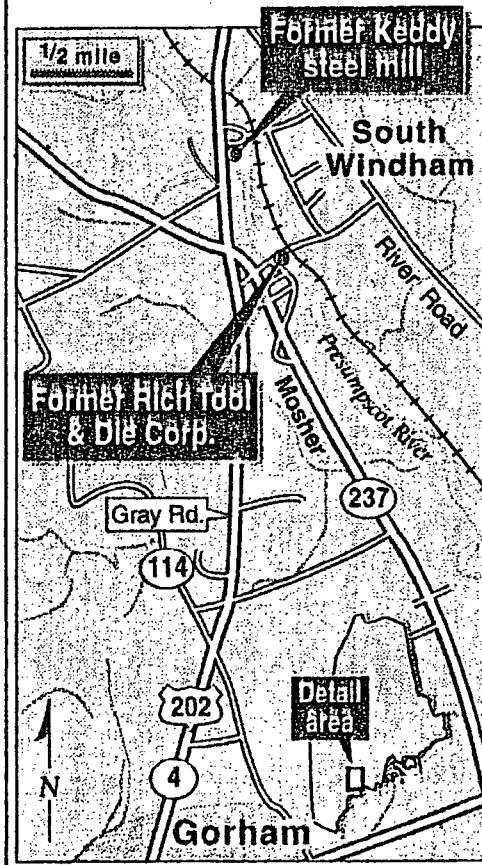
To further the effort, Windham also is hosting a conference April 26 called "Dreaming in Brick: Reviving Mill Buildings." Put on by the Southern Maine Economic Development District, the workshop will use the South Windham mills as case studies for other communities grappling with similar issues.

Many southern Maine towns share Windham's desire to find new occupants for vacant mill buildings. But the pool of businesses seeking that type of space is limited, and few developers are willing to invest heavily in major renovations.

"Really, what drives the whole

Seeking tenants

Little Falls Village, a hamlet including both the Gorham and Windham sides of the Presumpscot River near Route 202, stands to benefit if new occupants can be found for the area's two vacant mills.



thing is economics — price," said Thomas Dunham of The Dunham Group, which is marketing the 80,000-square-foot mill that until three years ago housed the Rich Tool and Die Co.

"A team effort between the pri-

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vate and public sector can speed up the process and enhance the occupancy rate, but you still have to have a demand for that type of product in the community."

It is a conundrum many New England communities face: how to transform large, vacant, often obsolete buildings into the economic engines they once were.

Often, success can mean the difference in the community between blight and vitality.

Project is two-town effort

Little Falls village straddles the Presumpscot, the municipal boundary between Gorham and Windham. The village is partially in each town and both towns are supporting redevelopment efforts there.

Denise Potter runs a small variety store on Main Street, a block from the vacant cinder-block shell of the old steel mill that dominates the village center. Potter is banking on the resurrection of the mills. She remembers when the South Windham portion of the village was the closest thing to a town center that Windham had.

"This was the place to be, and there was nothing up there," she said of the Route 302 commercial strip in North Windham, where she lives. "Now that's the place to be."

Now many historic village storefronts are vacant, and few businesses have been able to survive. Decaying sidewalks, little landscaping and a number of run-down houses demonstrate the lack of investment in the area.

"A lot of times it takes someone with a vision and a commitment to working with the older structures."

Karen Martin,
Greater Portland Council
of Governments.

Potter knows that redeveloping the mills would be a major boost to her business, which has changed hands several times in recent years. New occupants for the mills also would help spruce up the village, she says.

"It's not real attractive," she said of the 90-year-old steel mill that presides over Main Street's crossing of the Presumpscot. "It needs some serious work."

The mill complex has sat vacant for 20 years, falling further into disrepair. The roof of a secondary brick building on the front of the property has caved in.

The town hopes to use the federal grant to catalog the resources that can help turn the area around and create a plan for how that renaissance can occur. It plans to tap a resurgence in community spirit exemplified by the creation of the Little Falls/South Windham Village Association a year ago.

The town also does not want to run afoul of residents' development standards, as occurred when residents fought and killed Stone and Webster's plan to build a de-inking facility just north of the village.

Ann Alexander, an organizer of

the village association, hopes new businesses in the mills will lead to better amenities for residents.

"We feel like our village is not being taken care of as good as it could. The sidewalks are falling apart and the bridge between Gorham and Windham is kind of in bad shape. Maybe if there are more businesses there, things as a whole will be taken care of better."

"Possibly by businesses going in we could get some money for some recreation near the river, something for the kids, maybe a baseball field," Alexander said. "It's a dream, really."

Residents also hope more commercial activity in town would expand local services. Residents long for a local hardware shop and video store, Alexander said.

Financing more difficult

Renovating old mills was easier in the 1980s. Real estate attracted investment with the promise of lucrative payoffs in high rent and escalating resale value. Banks loaned money liberally and new construction and existing modern commercial space was pricey.

But developers and banks became more conservative after the real estate crash of the early 1990s.

"If a community chooses to redevelop some of its assets in town, a community is going to have to step up, because it's unlikely you're going to see a private developer step up," Dunham said.

Camden was lucky.

MBNA Corp. converted the vacant Knox Woolen Mill into its Northeast Regional office in 1993, a facility employing 800 people. Town officials, who were not aggressively marketing the mill, say the low-

impact, high-technology mill is an ideal occupant for the complex that covers seven acres of downtown.

But Dunham says a more appropriate model are the mill redevelopment efforts in the Lewiston area. There, public investment and aggressive pursuit of small businesses with growth potential is helping to fill the vacant buildings with new jobs.

Windham Town Manager Glenn Fratto says the town wants to help the mill owners find the small tenants that will grow to fill the space and also provide the cash flow to cover improvements.

Besides indirect support such as pursuit of the planning grant and the mill re-use conference, he expects the town could help by creating a special tax district. The town would dedicate property taxes from new investment to community improvements that enhance the area and ultimately, the value of the mills.

"A lot of times it takes someone with a vision and a commitment to working with the older structures," said Karen Martin, who works for the Greater Portland Council of Governments. Martin arranged the Windham conference and prepared the Little Falls Village grant application.

By arranging a conference that will bring together developers, business owners, regulators and local officials, Martin hopes participating towns will be better prepared to assist mill owners for their mutual benefit.

"It's not just economic development. It's an environmental issue. It's a community issue. It's a neighborhood issue," Martin said.